

impression that he'd been very unhappy. Talking of markets drying up... as a novelist he'd found his particular market completely gone, hadn't he?

He was the sort of mid-list genre writer who saw it drying up around him – as opposed to someone like Brian Aldiss, who goes on doing this, that and the other.

Yes, much more versatile – highly versatile, in fact, Brian: his works cover an enormous range of subjects and topics. I'm glad he's still going strong.

But the point is that writers like yourself or Aldiss can still get collections published.

Oh, yes. My last one, *War Fever*, was made up of comparatively recent material. I'm not sure where all those things were published – some in *Ambit*, some in *Interzone*, various places, I can't remember in detail – but the thing about short stories is that one's got to cast one's mind into the short-story writing mode. At the time when I was writing most of my short stories I was thinking almost exclusively in those terms. I was as much a short-story writer as, say, Ray Bradbury was. I didn't think about writing novels; I'd get an idea and think, "that'd make a story!" I'd immediately see an idea in terms of short-story potential; whereas now, with a comparable idea, I think, "yes, I can expand that." I'm thinking in terms of a much larger kind of canvas. Without the ready market, particularly for the longer short story – because 2,000- and 3,000-word stories, some of which I've written lately, are too short, you can't really move inside that sort of length – without the market for the longer short story, there's no point in my casting my mind in that mode. I now think exclusively like a novelist, which is a pity but there we are – I'm 65, I've had a good run for my money. It may be that I'm now writing the sort of novels that I would have written had I never entered the genre of science fiction, if you see what I mean. If I'd begun as a mainstream writer, forced to adapt my particular kind of imagination to the needs and the conventions of the mainstream novel, I would probably have started out with books like *The Day of Creation* and *Rushing to Paradise* – and the novel I've just written.

So, is the new novel in the same vein as Rushing to Paradise?

Yes, it is. It's not set on a desert island or anything of that kind, but I suppose it's a social critique, in a way, like *Rushing to Paradise*. It's inves-

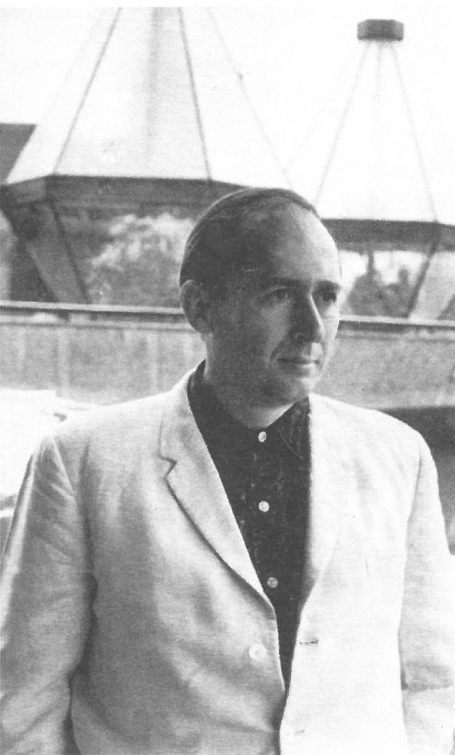
tigative. It's in some respects like my novella *Running Wild*.

Ah, you're entering the crime field!

Well, it's subject is crime – crime in its social, and possibly beneficial, roles as a sort of facilitator. I've cast it in the form of what appears to be a murder mystery. It's a crime story in the sense that *Running Wild* was a crime story. But that's just at first sight.

Have you decided on a title?

Cocaine Nights, and it's to be published in September 1996. My editor, Malcolm Edwards, and HarperCollins like the



J.G. Ballard c. 1970

Photo: Jerry Bauer

title, so I'm happy with it. Think of ocean liners, *art deco* hotels, midnight blue skies...

If the David Cronenberg film of Crash is out by then, it's going to be a busy autumn for you.

That would be a big help! I think the publishers are alert to that. Shooting was complete on *Crash* in mid-December. I talked to Cronenberg on the phone in late November, and everything seems to have gone very well. He's now editing the footage and they hope to have a print in time for the Cannes Film Festival in May. I hope it will be released in the late summer or autumn, but I have no hard news.

A final question: Kingsley Amis died recently. I know he helped you in the

early part of your career. Do you want to say anything about him?

I think he rendered great service to the cause of science fiction, with *New Maps of Hell* in 1960. He single-handedly brought a new readership to sf that would have ignored it but for his championing of the genre. He wrote regularly about sf in newspapers and places like the *New Statesman* (which was very influential in those days), and he talked up sf to publishers he knew. He certainly drew Victor Gollancz's attention to *The Drowned World* – in fact, the old boy didn't want to publish it as sf, he thought putting "sf" on its jacket would kill it – but I think Kingsley was right in a way to say otherwise. He rendered great services to the sf field in Britain, and certainly must have drawn a new readership to science fiction. I think his general approach in *New Maps of Hell*, which was that the future of sf lay in the field of social criticism rather than rocketry and space travel (although it was proved false, in that sf didn't move in that direction), was the right approach to take if he was going to draw in the mainstream readers of the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, who were intrigued by sf if they could place it within an on-going social critique – you know, that modern sf had inherited its most important role from books like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*. That was the right approach to take, actually. Also, he played a very important role in the 60s as an anthologist: he and Robert Conquest, the historian, edited sf anthologies, and these helped to widen the audience for sf, because Amis very carefully picked the sort of stories that would appeal to mainstream readers rather than genre readers.

Later, of course, in the late 60s and 70s, Amis changed, and he became hostile to innovation of any kind. His hostility was exactly the hostility of, say, a jazz enthusiast who likes the trad forms laid down in the 20s and 30s and resents any attempt to enlarge the field – in fact he *was* a jazz enthusiast in exactly that same way; he loathed any sort of modern jazz, just as he really loathed the *Atrocity Exhibition* stories. He thought I was wilfully destroying what talent I had. Of course, he may have been right! Who can say? And from then on, in the 70s, early 80s, he became totally blimpish in respect of sf. I don't think he read sf any more and had no ideas about it that made sense. As I think I said in one of my reviews, which I re-read in the new book, he imagined in the 1970s that sf was dominated by writers imitating Robbe-Grillet. In fact the absolute opposite was taking place! But there we are.

– just allowed to go back unharmed – was acting as a lure out there in the bright summer days, giving hope, keeping the dream alive in others, but part of the trap, knowing or unknowing. Pray Destiny it was unknowing. Such a small shrewd price to pay, letting one or two go free, letting others go back maimed. Let the tombs have a bad day and so keep them coming.

"Be merciful, Dormeuse. Arasty."

"I am, little hunter. With you I truly am. Normally I grant the beautiful lie, tell those I am about to rob of life, light and limb, beauty, eons of youth, of how normally death is what makes lives, cultures, ultimately defines civilization. I remind them that it's right that immortals should reach a point of idle curiosity and need to be challenged, extended, tested. I tell them that whatever their fates individually, those I kill or hurt are helping maintain the tenor of life for all."

"But you're actually culling."

"Avenging. It's simpler."

"Out of envy."

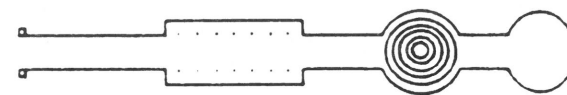
"Bad enough in life. But when it's all there is, all that's left, it fills the largest cup, becomes a vast power. I phrase it so they think they will be spared somehow. That they are different and special. To some I even suggest that their personalities will join mine in the tomb matrix. Then, when there is hope, when vanity and optimism is there in hints and the absolute conviction of ego, then I cripple and kill, then I bring them to the worst of hells, to such terrible insurmountable despair. You I have spared this anguish, Beni."

"Spared me! By telling me the truth?"

"Yes."

"But I can't believe you, can I? Not after what you've just said."

"You really should. Look at your display." Beni did, saw how simply, elegantly, the tomb's long-dead owner, this printing of her anyway, had expressed his dilemma.



A maze. He was in a maze. He did not know what to say. Arasty, the ghost of her, smiled. "Well?"

"Never be importunate, I was always told. Never beg."

"I've told you I'm being merciful. I might listen."

"All right. Don't kill me."

"I won't."

"Don't maim me."

"I won't."

"Let me return." As part of the trap, he didn't say, refusing to go so far.

"Earn it."

"I need to think. Concentrate."

"Shall I leave?"

"You'd still be here. You're in the walls."

"True. The tomb."

"The trap."

"The trap, yes. My personality is coded through all this. But it would be easier for you to concentrate."

And the intercept vanished, took away her glow, left only dim yellow lamplight, tunnelling, vitreous, intimate darkness without her darkling eyes.

Beni stopped, pretended to think, triggered his implant, saw again the plan of her tomb picked out in light, saw that he was at the central chamber, the structural heart of what this thwarted, predatory, former woman had become. Out of despair.

"Oh, Dormeuse, Dormeuse," he murmured. "I am so sorry." Imagining how it had to be, the 85 labouring over the final secret plan, the hate and loss in their hearts as all the others sailed blissfully on, away, abandoning.

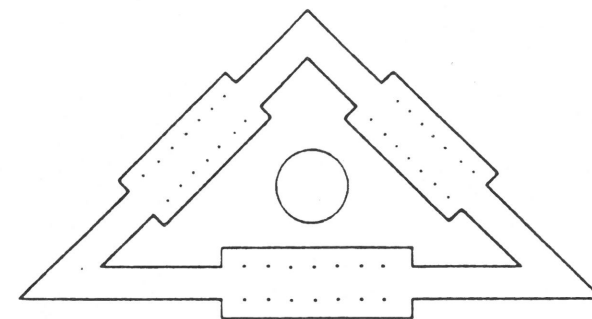
What choice then. What choice now. For them both.

"We can change this," he said, resolved, striding on to his goal, though he did believe he was already there. "We can make a start here. Try to be friends. Let me try to be that, Arasty. At least try to be that."

"Yes," the tomb said, the walls, the night, as he strode on in his cone of yellow light into the endlessness of the hill. "And that is why."

Outside the Nothing Stones pull and pull and will forever pull, drawing in the emptiness of infinity, the blackness of eyes made hard, so unforgivingly hard. She is punitive and spiteful and so so determined. It is all she will ever have.

Beni strides on with his young man's dreams – of success, of being different, better than the best, with his wonderful new dream of achieving something more, something new. He walks into night and does not see the final reading, does not know just how merciful she has been, that this time there is mercy, as much of it as there can ever be. He believes he can still be the greatest of them all. He still believes Ramirez is someone else.



Terry Dowling is one of Australia's leading sf writers (along with George Turner, Damien Broderick, Greg Egan, Sean McMullen and a few others). The above story marks his first appearance in *Interzone*. Best known for his future-Outback tales in the "Rynosseros" series – described as reminiscent of a blend of Cordwainer Smith and Jack Vance, but with a strong Aussie flavour – he also has an interest in a certain British writer: his 113,000-word MA thesis (University of Sydney, 1981) was entitled *Beguiled Into Crisis: J. G. Ballard and the Surrealistic Novel*.